

## “Predictive Evaluation”: Some Comments on Michael Scriven’s Article in the June 2007 Issue of JMDE

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1. “*Controversy is the Mother of Creation*”: Such was the encouraging reaction of Michael Scriven when I asked whether constructively critical observations to his article, under the section “Ideas to Consider,” on “Predictive Evaluation,” (Scriven, 2007) would be welcome. So, why not insert a new category in JMDE’s periodic publications that would, quite appropriately, be called “*Creative Controversy*”? Contributions to this category would thus be subject to a double condition. They would have to be (a) honest (i.e., clearly exposing differences of opinions) and (b) constructive (i.e., concerned about finding common ground, not in the sense of a bad compromise which would leave both, writer and commentator, unsatisfied, but in the sense of arriving at common solutions that would be more satisfactory than the initial positions of both. So, here’s a first try:
2. Should evaluators be involved in the future of their evaluands? *They should*, I say, although in an advisory capacity only. *They can’t help it*, says Scriven. According to him, evaluations are, due to their very nature, partly or even wholly *predictive*. His article makes stimulating and (partly) convincing reading. What a pity that he himself should make his reasoning less persuasive by (i) introducing a couple of (wholly avoidable) confusing notions of a terminological nature and by (ii) failing to draw a sharp line between the responsibilities of evaluators on the one hand and planners on the other. Could he get his message across, yet avoid falling into these two pitfalls? Yes, I believe he could.
3. Can an evaluation be “predictive”? Can evaluators foresee the future, predict what will happen? Of course not, nobody can, and that includes planners, decision makers and implementers as well. The only food that’s available for evaluators is *past events*. Such “events” can also include studies planners have worked out, even before the first step along the road towards implementation is taken. So, evaluators evaluate the past, including the most recent past, *but never the future*. They accumulate *all* they know as professionals that way. This is why the term “ex-ante evaluation” is so confusing and beside the point. The term “planning” covers exactly what “ex-ante evaluations” are meant to say, and if that superfluous word is dropped from evaluators’ vocabulary, then they can also do without the pleonastic terms “ex-post evaluation” and “retrospective evaluation”. Evaluative analysis covers the past, only and exclusively.
4. So, what evaluators *can* do with a view to improving future action is to formulate “if-then” conclusions and to base their recommendations to planners on these conclusions; for instance: “If agricultural development projects omit the analysis of socio-cultural problems and contextual factors, then they will probably fail.” Follows the “therefore” recommendation: “Therefore, planners should include these

problems and factors into the terms of reference of their studies.” Planners are free to follow these recommendations or not. It is their responsibility. So, it is quite out of the question for evaluators to venture any “predictions.” It will rather be up to planners to formulate such predictions but, of course, even they can never be sure if events they plan to occur will, indeed, do so.

5. Please note that planners/implementers can change their hats and turn into evaluators as happens for all “self-evaluations.” If they do so, their analysis will concern past experience without any reference to the future. If then they consider what they have learned by evaluation and decide to apply it partly or wholly to future action, they will change hats again, dropping the “E-hat” and donning the “P-hat.” Evaluators turning into planners will be a less frequent case but it happens. There is nothing wrong with these metamorphoses as long as everyone respects the responsibilities that are linked to the *function* of evaluation on the one hand and to the *function* of planning on the other.
6. Coming back to the article by Scriven, there is still another case of what I think is terminological confusion blurring an otherwise highly relevant argument. It is the following:
  - a. Planning and deciding on who should be nominated for vacant research positions are, of course, highly important acts and should be fully in line with the nature of the job in question as well as with the tenets of the overall research policy. Scriven’s article points out that (i) past performance is an important indicator to be considered prior to this decision, but that it is by no means the only one. The candidate may, indeed, have (ii) shifted interest; may be (iii ) a burn out victim of frustration (poor chap); may have (iv) bumped his head into an intellectual wall which leaves him or her in a parrot-like

position of boring repetitiveness; may have (v) experienced no-fault traumatic events of, for instance, loss of spouse or of health; may have (vi) yielded to the temptations of drugs and booze; or (vii) may fail to realize that s/he is no longer as young as they used to be and that therefore s/he has been overtaken by events and would best be dropped in an old people’s home; fortunately, concerning this last predicament, Scriven is quick to point out that there is “*huge interpersonal variation*” in that respect; and that is really a *huge comfort* for us oldies whose origin reaches way beyond the horizon of the middle of last century and to whom, if we’re lucky, Alzheimer’s may come later rather than sooner.

- b. Scriven calls points (i) to (vii) above “correction factors” because, according to him, “this example from the personal evaluation domain shows that explicit attention to the prediction element in the evaluation task can lead to major error reduction.”
- c. I must confess that this wording, while drawing our attention to *highly relevant aspects in research personnel management*, seems to me confusing and misleading. Why?
- d. First of all, there is no such thing as “the prediction element in the evaluation task.” All evaluation can and should do is to draw the attention of planners/decision makers to the need to include these aspects into the terms of reference of the preparatory studies that will lead up to the choice of the successful candidates. Evaluation recommends, it does not predict. And how could it, as it does not know what planners/decision makers are going to decide? That’s in the future, not in the past. Future events must be planned and cannot be evaluated.

7. So, what does evaluation have to do with factors (i) to (vii)? Everything (but not quite...)! Evaluation found these factors, formulated them, analyzed the relative importance of each, all this on the basis of experience, *past experience* (which normally it should not be necessary to underline as there is no such thing as future experience). But evaluation can and should do more than that: It could, drawing together the upshot of all its studies in the field of research nominations (and thus knowing a lot more than planners ever will...), establish a general grid of factors to be taken into consideration by planners/decision makers. Factors (i) to (vii) would be a good starting point for such grid, to be completed and refined as more experience accumulates and is analyzed by evaluation. The establishment of such a general grid would thus closely follow the methodological approach applied by “Project Cycle Management” (PCM) when establishing its “Basic Format” for Projects, Programs and Policies.
8. So here, in a nutshell, are my proposals:
  - a. Eliminate, once and for all, the terms “ex-ante evaluation”, “ex-post evaluation”, “retrospective evaluation” and “predictive evaluation” from the list of the evaluation vocabulary;
  - b. Respect the different roles and responsibilities of evaluators (or better of the evaluation function) on the one hand and of planners/decision makers (or better of the planning/decision making function) on the other.

If we do that, collaboration between the two functions will become effective and will yield optimal results for those whom they should serve *together*: intended beneficiaries.

## References

- Scriven, M. (2007). Predictive evaluation. *Journal of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation*, 4(7), 71-73.